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From poetry and perfume to grief and girlhood, “Experience of Vastness” at Fleiss-Vallois traced the hidden nectars of feminine creation

*Is a witch a polymath?* At *Experience of Vastness*, a panel held at the Upper East Side gallery Fleiss-Vallois in partnership with The Whitney Review of New Writing, the question, posed by Whitney Mallett, flipped tales of feminine resistance inside out to expose its intestines. The panelists, poet Ariana Reines, writer Alex Auder, and perfumer Marissa Zappas, held

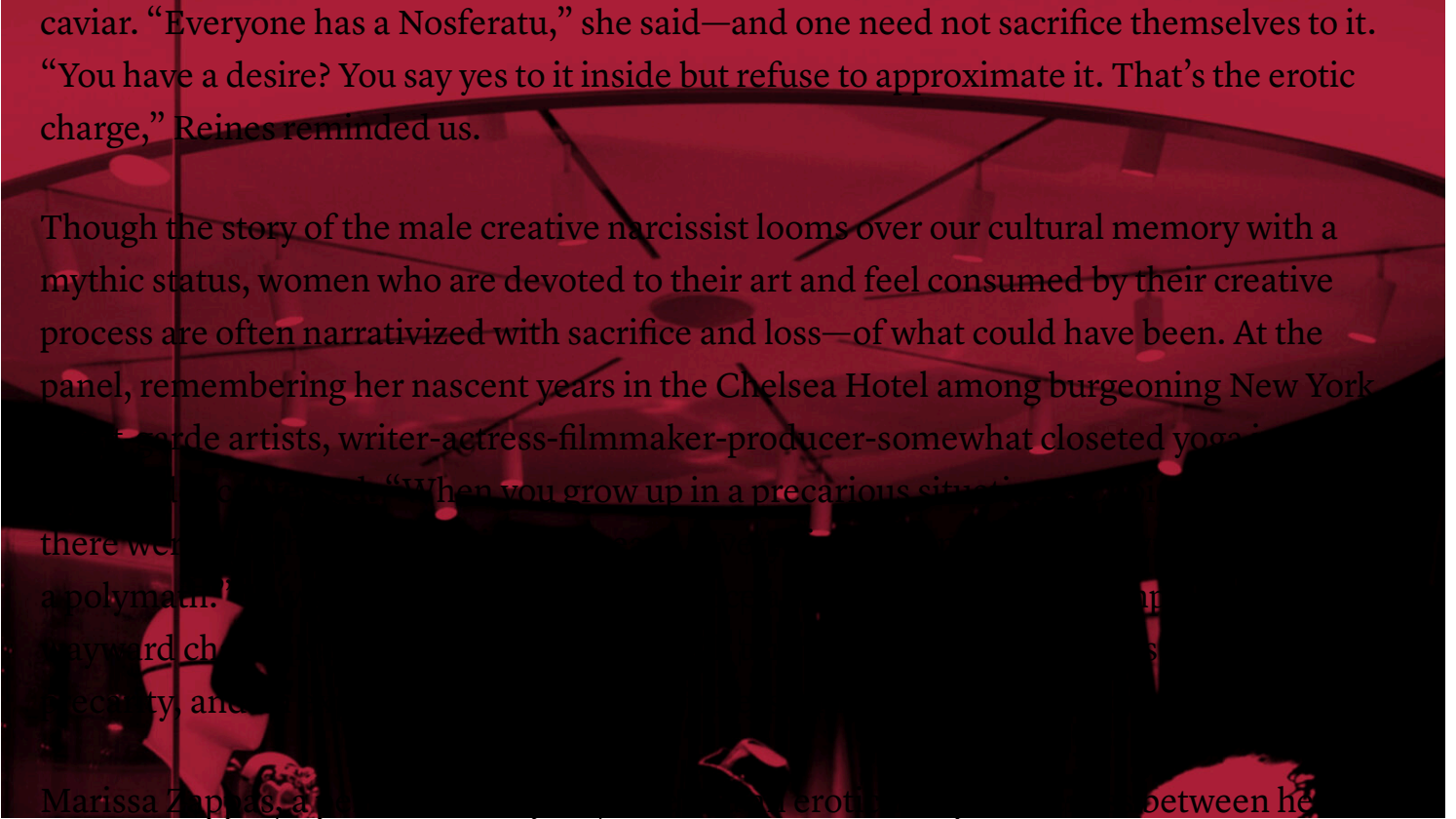
Downstairs, in the presence of Niki de Saint Phalle's *La Cathédrale Aux Aigles* (1962), a painting made by shooting at plastic packages of paint on a relief with a .22 rifle, celebrations commenced for *The Rose*, Ariana Reines' newest poetry collection. She credited the title to her ex's "exquisite" grandmother. "She told me I should write about beautiful things. I was so humiliated by that. I only write about ugly things, about slaughtered animals... I've made this whole career, just hideousness, ugliness, and cruelty." Robed in a silk, floral dress she said she hates, Reines laughed before jesting that performing poetry is "like comedy but not funny, entertaining but still humiliating."



Reines' book is an examination of the age-old story of seduction, and contemporary discourses around sex, love, and attraction. Her creative process, she shared, is like love, and life—consisting of both surrender and choice. “There’s a falling-ness that’s already happening, but there’s also this inner consent that’s active. It changes the quality of reality, and that’s when art begins. Then I can work with it a bit.” To the girl who complains of being seduced by a narcissist *asshole*, and consents to be seduced as an adult, Reines said, “You bought the ticket, take the ride!”

Framed this way, I think to myself that being a polymath is not so much about being crowned with the epithet “Renaissance Man,” and jacking yourself off in a room full of laurels, but learning and maintaining an unquenchable curiosity towards the world we hold inside of ourselves. It is possible, Reines' poetry teaches us, that two can exist at the same time; to say yes and no—which comes from a radical embrace of our desires rather than a rejection of them. Later, at the Mark Hotel, I would overhear LA/NYC-based internet girl and self-professed “jack-tress of all trades” Mackenzie Thomas drawling over martinis and





caviar. “Everyone has a Nosferatu,” she said—and one need not sacrifice themselves to it. “You have a desire? You say yes to it inside but refuse to approximate it. That’s the erotic charge,” Reines reminded us.

Though the story of the male creative narcissist looms over our cultural memory with a mythic status, women who are devoted to their art and feel consumed by their creative process are often narrativized with sacrifice and loss—of what could have been. At the panel, remembering her nascent years in the Chelsea Hotel among burgeoning New York avant-garde artists, writer-actress-filmmaker-producer-somewhat closeted yogi Marissa Zappas, a.k.a. “The Erotic,” said, “When you grow up in a precarious situation, there were no boundaries. I was a polymath. I was a writer, a dancer, a filmmaker, a performer, a wayward child, a child of necessity, and a child of love.”

Marissa Zappas, a.k.a. “The Erotic,” spoke about the tension between her creative process and her romantic relationships. She held sacred her creative process: “If I’m making a perfume, it’s the tip of the iceberg. I’m probably also writing about it, dancing about it. Probably getting a dog about it.” Our eyes followed hers to the baby dalmatian named Gogo Schiaparelli, *Gogo* for short, who’s consumed her world for the past two months. “I’ve been prioritizing this living creature and not myself, and it feels so good. It made me realize I don’t want to be in a creative process all the time, at all. I just want to give myself to something else.”



This surrender to our deeper desires, like Niki de Saint Phalle's courageous renunciation from her overlords that haunted her "shooting paintings" to expressions of total fecundity and joy in her *Nanas* sculptures, is attuned to something larger than ourselves. The task of taking responsibility for oneself is in simultaneous tension with the frailness of our bodies, the precariousness of our existence, or our connection to a cosmos. It is a tension that cannot be resolved by a mastering, or a conquest of self, that the machine of capitalism demands of us.

This tension is most clear when grief and rage make silly of our cognitive capacities. Writing in the aftermath of her mother's suicide, Reines was gifted a bottle of perfume from Zappas. "I was really, really disoriented and felt that through your work I can feel my grandmother, I can feel my mother, and that was very centric for me," Reines said as Zappas confided that she listens to a ten-minute voice note from Reines regularly. I am reminded of listening to my friend's voice, cradling my phone up to my ear like a seashell, smiling and laughing. In spite of the spatial and temporal distance, or because of it, voice memos carry an uncanny intimacy—like letters from a lover but unedited, untouched, and raw; a message from a voice from another time.

“I wonder if Leonora and Niki had friends like us? It can be quite isolating...” Zappas started, “...to be a *polymath witch!*” Reines finished. As Zappas passed around a scent she made for the occasion—rose oil mixed with seaweed absolute—an intimacy thickened with each touch of our hands, ballooning in the spaces between our bodies. For a moment, perhaps under a spell, the insanity and delusion it takes to live in this world are transmuted into what could be called an *experience of vastness*. In her 2019 poetry collection *A Sand Book*, Reines writes: “There are nectars hidden in your body. Suck. Your own. Tongue.”

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